

Alexandrite

It's all about the color change!

When gem connoisseurs speak of rarity, often the first example given is the rare form of chrysoberyl known as alexandrite. All alexandrite changes color under different light sources, but the best gems change from teal-green in daylight to raspberry or purplish-red in incandescent light.

Legend has it that in 1830 a local Russian peasant was walking along the bank of the Tokovaya River at the base of the Ural Mountains when he stumbled across some green stones. The area already had several other mines and the local town of Ekaterinburg had developed into a center of lapidary and gem trade. The green stones turned out to be emeralds and mining began in earnest.

Tokovaya's mica schists produced a variety of gem rough and eventually it was discovered that one type had the strange ability to change color from red to green at different times of day! The unusual gem was named for Czarevitch Alexander Nicolajevitch and was immediately popular, helped along no doubt by its color's resemblance to those of the Russian national military.

The ability of alexandrite to change color is key to its popularity and value. Any chrysoberyl that remains green under incandescent light is

still a beautiful stone in its own right, but it can not be called alexandrite. There are several other examples of gems that shift colors depending on the light source but most of them merely shift one step along the color wheel - say from red to purple. What makes alexandrite so special is its ability to jump across the color wheel changing from red to green!

In 1987 alexandrite was discovered near the small Brazilian town of Hematita. When word

leaked out, three thousand *garimpeiros* or prospectors descended on a small valley only six hundred fifty feet long to seek their fortune. The run lasted approximately twelve weeks from April to June with an average of one death by gunshot per week until the government moved in and shut everything down. By that time the mine was essentially played out and only small quantities have been found since.

While there is no single large source for alexandrite today, a variety of locations continue to produce some gems. Besides Russia and Brazil, alexandrite is also found in small quantities in Sri Lanka, India, Madagascar and Tanzania.

Synthetic alexandrite does exist and is grown as crystals using the hydrothermal technique, but the most common substitute seen is a variety of synthetic corundum that changes from bluish purple to reddish-purple in different lights.



Brazilian Alexandrite showing color change from purplish-red to teal green



Alexandrite, diamond and platinum ring \$2072



Alexandrite, Dinosaur Bone, Purple Jasper, Dendritic Chrysoprase set in Palladium, 14KT and 18KT Yellow Gold \$2200



Alexandrite, diamond and 14KT gold earrings \$820